

CHAPTER XXII

INFLUENCING BY SUGGESTION

Sometimes the feeling that a given way of looking at things is undoubtedly correct prevents the mind from thinking at all. . . . In view of the hindrances which certain kinds or degrees of feeling throw into the way of thinking, it might be inferred that the thinker must suppress the element of feeling in the inner life. No greater mistake could be made. If the Creator endowed man with the power to think, to feel, and to will, these several activities of the mind are not designed to be in conflict, and so long as any one of them is not perverted or allowed to run to excess, it necessarily aids and strengthens the others in their normal functions.

—NATHAN C. SCHAEFFER, *Thinking and Learning to Think*.

When we weigh, compare, and decide upon the value of any given ideas, we reason; when an idea produces in us an opinion or an action, without first being subjected to deliberation, we are moved by suggestion.

Man was formerly thought to be a reasoning animal, basing his actions on the conclusions of natural logic. It was supposed that before forming an opinion or deciding on a course of conduct he weighed at least some of the reasons for and against the matter, and performed a more or less simple process of reasoning. But modern research has shown that quite the opposite is true. Most of our opinions and actions are not based upon conscious reasoning, but are the result of suggestion. In fact, some authorities declare that an act of pure reasoning is very rare in the average mind. Momentous decisions are made, far-reaching actions are determined upon, primarily by the force of suggestion.

Notice that word “primarily,” for simple thought, and even mature reasoning, often follows a suggestion accepted in the mind, and the thinker fondly supposes that his conclusion is from first to last based on cold logic.

The Basis of Suggestion

We must think of suggestion both as an effect and as a cause. Considered as an effect, or objectively, there must be something in the hearer that predisposes him to receive suggestion; considered as a cause, or subjectively, there must be some methods by which the speaker can move upon that particularly susceptible attitude of the hearer. How to do this honestly and fairly is our problem—to do it dishonestly and trickily, to use suggestion to bring about conviction and action without a basis of right and truth and in a bad cause, is to assume the terrible responsibility that must fall on the champion of error. Jesus scorned not to use suggestion so that he might move men to their benefit, but every vicious trickster has adopted the same means to reach base ends. Therefore honest men will examine well into their motives and into the truth of their cause, before seeking to influence men by suggestion.

Three fundamental conditions make us all susceptible to suggestion:

We naturally respect authority. In every mind this is only a question of degree, ranging from the subject who is easily hypnotized to the stubborn mind that fortifies itself the more strongly with every assault upon its opinion. The latter type is almost immune to suggestion.

One of the singular things about suggestion is that it is rarely a fixed quantity. The mind that is receptive to the authority of a certain person may prove inflexible to another; moods and environments that produce hypnosis readily in one instance may be entirely inoperative in another; and some minds can scarcely ever be thus moved. We do know, however, that the feeling of the subject that authority—influence, power, domination, control, whatever you wish to call it—lies in the person of the suggester, is the basis of all suggestion.

The extreme force of this influence is demonstrated in hypnotism. The hypnotic subject is told that he is in the water; he accepts the statement as true and makes swimming motions. He is told that a band is marching down

the street, playing “The Star Spangled Banner;” he declares he hears the music, arises and stands with head bared.

In the same way some speakers are able to achieve a modified hypnotic effect upon their audiences. The hearers will applaud measures and ideas which, after individual reflection, they will repudiate unless such reflection brings the conviction that the first impression is correct.

A second important principle is that *our feelings, thoughts and wills tend to follow the line of least resistance*. Once open the mind to the sway of one feeling and it requires a greater power of feeling, thought, or will—or even all three—to unseat it. Our feelings influence our judgments and volitions much more than we care to admit. So true is this that it is a superhuman task to get an audience to reason fairly on a subject on which it feels deeply, and when this result is accomplished the success becomes noteworthy, as in the case of Henry Ward Beecher’s Liverpool speech. Emotional ideas once accepted are soon cherished, and finally become our very inmost selves. Attitudes based on feelings alone are prejudices.

What is true of our feelings, in this respect, applies to our ideas: All thoughts that enter the mind tend to be accepted as truth unless a stronger and contradictory thought arises.

The speaker skilled in moving men to action manages to dominate the minds of his audience with his thoughts by subtly prohibiting the entertaining of ideas hostile to his own. Most of us are captured by the latest strong attack, and if we can be induced to act while under the stress of that last insistent thought, we lose sight of counter influences. The fact is that almost all our decisions—if they involve thought at all—are of this sort: At the moment of decision the course of action then under contemplation usurps the attention, and conflicting ideas are dropped out of consideration.

The head of a large publishing house remarked only recently that ninety per cent of the people who bought books by subscription never read them. They buy because the salesman presents his wares so skillfully that every

consideration but the attractiveness of the book drops out of the mind, and that thought prompts action. Every idea that enters the mind will result in action unless a contradictory thought arises to prohibit it. Think of singing the musical scale and it will result in your singing it unless the counter-thought of its futility or absurdity inhibits your action. If you bandage and “doctor” a horse’s foot, he will go lame. You cannot think of swallowing, without the muscles used in that process being affected. You cannot think of saying “hello,” without a slight movement of the muscles of speech. To warn children that they should not put beans up their noses is the surest method of getting them to do it. Every thought called up in the mind of your audience will work either for or against you. Thoughts are not dead matter; they radiate dynamic energy—the thoughts all tend to pass into action. “Thought is another name for fate.” Dominate your hearers’ thoughts, allay all contradictory ideas, and you will sway them as you wish.

Volitions as well as feelings and thoughts tend to follow the line of least resistance. That is what makes habit. Suggest to a man that it is impossible to change his mind and in most cases it becomes more difficult to do so—the exception is the man who naturally jumps to the contrary. Counter suggestion is the only way to reach him. Suggest subtly and persistently that the opinions of those in the audience who are opposed to your views are changing, and it requires an effort of the will—in fact, a summoning of the forces of feeling, thought and will—to stem the tide of change that has subconsciously set in.

But, not only are we moved by authority, and tend toward channels of least resistance: *We are all influenced by our environments.* It is difficult to rise above the sway of a crowd—its enthusiasms and its fears are contagious because they are suggestive. What so many feel, we say to ourselves, must have some basis in truth. Ten times ten makes more than one hundred. Set ten men to speaking to ten audiences of ten men each, and compare the aggregate power of those ten speakers with that of one man

addressing one hundred men. The ten speakers may be more logically convincing than the single orator, but the chances are strongly in favor of the one man's reaching a greater total effect, for the hundred men will radiate conviction and resolution as ten small groups could not. We all know the truism about the enthusiasm of numbers. (See the chapter on "Influencing the Crowd.")

Environment controls us unless the contrary is strongly suggested. A gloomy day, in a drab room, sparsely tenanted by listeners, invites platform disaster. Everyone feels it in the air. But let the speaker walk squarely up to the issue and suggest by all his feeling, manner and words that this is going to be a great gathering in every vital sense, and see how the suggestive power of environment recedes before the advance of a more potent suggestion—if such the speaker is able to make it.

Now these three factors—respect for authority, tendency to follow lines of least resistance, and susceptibility to environment—all help to bring the auditor into a state of mind favorable to suggestive influences, but they also react on the speaker, and now we must consider those personally causative, or subjective, forces which enable him to use suggestion effectively.

How the Speaker Can Make Suggestion Effective

We have seen that under the influence of authoritative suggestion the audience is inclined to accept the speaker's assertion without argument and criticism. But the audience is not in this state of mind unless it has implicit confidence in the speaker. If they lack faith in him, question his motives or knowledge, or even object to his manner, they will not be moved by his most logical conclusions and will fail to give him a just hearing. *It is all a matter of their confidence in him.* Whether the speaker finds it already in the warm, expectant look of his hearers, or must win to it against opposition or coldness, he must gain that one great vantage point before his

suggestions take on power in the hearts of his listeners. Confidence is the mother of Conviction.

Note in the opening of Henry W. Grady's after-dinner speech how he attempted to secure the confidence of his audience. He created a receptive atmosphere by a humorous story; expressed his desire to speak with earnestness and sincerity; acknowledged "the vast interests involved;" deprecated his "untried arm," and professed his humility. Would not such an introduction give you confidence in the speaker, unless you were strongly opposed to him? And even then, would it not partly disarm your antagonism?

Mr. President:—Bidden by your invitation to a discussion of the race problem—bidden by occasion to make a political speech—I appreciate, in trying to reconcile orders with propriety, the perplexity of the little maid, who, bidden to learn to swim, was yet adjured, "Now, go, my darling; hang your clothes on a hickory limb, and don't go near the water."

The stoutest apostle of the Church, they say, is the missionary, and the missionary, wherever he unfurls his flag, will never find himself in deeper need of unction and address than I, bidden tonight to plant the standard of a Southern Democrat in Boston's banquet hall, and to discuss the problem of the races in the home of Phillips and of Sumner. But, Mr. President, if a purpose to speak in perfect frankness and sincerity; if earnest understanding of the vast interests involved; if a consecrating sense of what disaster may follow further misunderstanding and estrangement; if these may be counted to steady undisciplined speech and to strengthen an untried arm—then, sir, I shall find the courage to proceed.

Note also Mr. Bryan's attempt to secure the confidence of his audience in the following introduction to his "Cross of Gold" speech delivered before the National Democratic Convention in Chicago, 1896. He asserts his own inability to oppose the "distinguished gentleman;" he maintains the holiness of his cause; and he declares that he will speak in the interest of humanity—well knowing that humanity is likely to have confidence in the champion of their rights. This introduction completely dominated the audience, and the speech made Mr. Bryan famous.

Mr. Chairman and Gentlemen of the Convention: I would be presumptuous indeed to present myself against the distinguished gentlemen to whom you have listened if this were a mere measuring

of abilities; but this is not a contest between persons. The humblest citizen in all the land, when clad in the armor of a righteous cause, is stronger than all the hosts of error. I come to speak to you in defense of a cause as holy as the cause of liberty—the cause of humanity.

Some speakers are able to beget confidence by their very manner, while others can not.

To secure confidence, be confident. How can you expect others to accept a message in which you lack, or seem to lack, faith yourself? Confidence is as contagious as disease. Napoleon rebuked an officer for using the word “impossible” in his presence. The speaker who will entertain no idea of defeat begets in his hearers the idea of his victory. Lady Macbeth was so confident of success that Macbeth changed his mind about undertaking the assassination. Columbus was so certain in his mission that Queen Isabella pawned her jewels to finance his expedition. Assert your message with implicit assurance, and your own belief will act as so much gunpowder to drive it home.

Advertisers have long utilized this principle. “The machine you will eventually buy,” “Ask the man who owns one,” “Has the strength of Gibraltar,” are publicity slogans so full of confidence that they give birth to confidence in the mind of the reader.

It should—but may not!—go without saying that confidence must have a solid ground of merit or there will be a ridiculous crash. It is all very well for the “spellbinder” to claim all the precincts—the official count is just ahead. The reaction against over-confidence and over-suggestion ought to warn those whose chief asset is mere bluff.

A short time ago a speaker arose in a public-speaking club and asserted that grass would spring from woodashes sprinkled over the soil, without the aid of seed. This idea was greeted with a laugh, but the speaker was so sure of his position that he reiterated the statement forcefully several times and cited his own personal experience as proof. One of the most intelligent men in the audience, who at first had derided the idea, at length came to believe

in it. When asked the reason for his sudden change of attitude, he replied: “Because the speaker is so confident.” In fact, he was so confident that it took a letter from the U. S. Department of Agriculture to dislodge his error.

If by a speaker’s confidence, intelligent men can be made to believe such preposterous theories as this where will the power of self-reliance cease when plausible propositions are under consideration, advanced with all the power of convincing speech?

Note the utter assurance in these selections:

I know not what course others may take, but as for me give me liberty or give me death.—
PATRICK HENRY.

I ne’er will ask ye quarter, and I ne’er will be your slave;
But I’ll swim the sea of slaughter, till I sink beneath its wave.

—PATTEN.

Come one, come all. This rock shall fly
From its firm base as soon as I.

—SIR WALTER SCOTT.

INVICTUS

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever Gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud;
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,

I am the master of my fate;
I am the captain of my soul.

—WILLIAM ERNEST HENLEY.

Authority is a factor in suggestion. We generally accept as truth, and without criticism, the words of an authority. When he speaks, contradictory ideas rarely arise in the mind to inhibit the action he suggests. A judge of the Supreme Court has the power of his words multiplied by the virtue of his position. The ideas of the U. S. Commissioner of Immigration on his subject are much more effective and powerful than those of a soap manufacturer, though the latter may be an able economist.

This principle also has been used in advertising. We are told that the physicians to two Kings have recommended Sanatogen. We are informed that the largest bank in America, Tiffany and Co., and The State, War, and Navy Departments, all use the Encyclopedia Britannica. The shrewd promoter gives stock in his company to influential bankers or business men in the community in order that he may use their examples as a selling argument.

If you wish to influence your audience through suggestion, if you would have your statements accepted without criticism or argument, you should appear in the light of an authority—and *be* one. Ignorance and credulity will remain unchanged unless the suggestion of authority be followed promptly by facts. Don't claim authority unless you carry your license in your pocket. Let reason support the position that suggestion has assumed.

Advertising will help to establish your reputation—it is “up to you” to maintain it. One speaker found that his reputation as a magazine writer was a splendid asset as a speaker. Mr. Bryan's publicity, gained by three nominations for the presidency and his position as Secretary of State, helps him to command large sums as a speaker. But—back of it all, he *is* a great speaker. Newspaper announcements, all kinds of advertising, formality, impressive introductions, all have a capital effect on the attitude of the

audience. But how ridiculous are all these if a toy pistol is advertised as a sixteen-inch gun!

Note how authority is used in the following to support the strength of the speaker's appeal:

Professor Alfred Russell Wallace has just celebrated his 90th birthday. Sharing with Charles Darwin the honor of discovering evolution, Professor Wallace has lately received many and signal honors from scientific societies. At the dinner given him in London his address was largely made up of reminiscences. He reviewed the progress of civilization during the last century and made a series of brilliant and startling contrasts between the England of 1813 and the world of 1913. He affirmed that our progress is only seeming and not real. Professor Wallace insists that the painters, the sculptors, the architects of Athens and Rome were so superior to the modern men that the very fragments of their marbles and temples are the despair of the present day artists. He tells us that man has improved his telescope and spectacles, but that he is losing his eyesight; that man is improving his looms, but stiffening his fingers; improving his automobile and his locomotive, but losing his legs; improving his foods, but losing his digestion. He adds that the modern white slave traffic, orphan asylums, and tenement house life in factory towns, make a black page in the history of the twentieth century.

Professor Wallace's views are reinforced by the report of the commission of Parliament on the causes of the deterioration of the factory-class people. In our own country Professor Jordan warns us against war, intemperance, overworking, underfeeding of poor children, and disturbs our contentment with his "Harvest of Blood." Professor Jenks is more pessimistic. He thinks that the pace, the climate, and the stress of city life, have broken down the Puritan stock, that in another century our old families will be extinct, and that the flood of immigration means a Niagara of muddy waters fouling the pure springs of American life. In his address in New Haven Professor Kellogg calls the roll of the signs of race degeneracy and tells us that this deterioration even indicates a trend toward race extinction.

—NEWELL DWIGHT HILLIS.

From every side come warnings to the American people. Our medical journals are filled with danger signals; new books and magazines, fresh from the press, tell us plainly that our people are fronting a social crisis. Mr. Jefferson, who was once regarded as good Democratic authority, seems to have differed in opinion from the gentleman who has addressed us on the part of the minority. Those who are opposed to this proposition tell us that the issue of paper money is a function of the bank, and that the government ought to go out of the banking business. I stand with Jefferson rather than with them, and tell them, as he did, that the issue of money is a function of government, and that the banks ought to go out of the governing business.

—WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN.

Authority is the great weapon against doubt, but even its force can rarely prevail against prejudice and persistent wrong-headedness. If any speaker has been able to forge a sword that is warranted to pierce such armor, let him bless humanity by sharing his secret with his platform brethren everywhere, for thus far he is alone in his glory.

There is a middle-ground between the suggestion of authority and the confession of weakness that offers a wide range for tact in the speaker. No one can advise you when to throw your “hat in the ring” and say defiantly at the outstart, “Gentlemen, I am here to fight!” Theodore Roosevelt can do that—Beecher would have been mobbed if he had begun in that style at Liverpool. It is for your own tact to decide whether you will use the disarming grace of Henry W. Grady’s introduction just quoted (even the time-worn joke was ingenuous and seemed to say, “Gentlemen, I come to you with no carefully-palmed coins”), or whether the solemn gravity of Mr. Bryan before the Convention will prove to be more effective. Only be sure that your opening attitude is well thought out, and if it change as you warm up to your subject, let not the change lay you open to a revulsion of feeling in your audience.

Example is a powerful means of suggestion. As we saw while thinking of environment in its effects on an audience, we do, without the usual amount of hesitation and criticism, what others are doing. Paris wears certain hats and gowns; the rest of the world imitates. The child mimics the actions, accents and intonations of the parent. Were a child never to hear anyone speak, he would never acquire the power of speech, unless under most arduous training, and even then only imperfectly. One of the biggest department stores in the United States spends fortunes on one advertising slogan: “Everybody is going to the big store.” That makes everybody want to go.

You can reinforce the power of your message by showing that it has been widely accepted. Political organizations subsidize applause to create

the impression that their speakers' ideas are warmly received and approved by the audience. The advocates of the commission-form of government of cities, the champions of votes for women, reserve as their strongest arguments the fact that a number of cities and states have already successfully accepted their plans. Advertisements use the testimonial for its power of suggestion.

Observe how this principle has been applied in the following selections, and utilize it on every occasion possible in your attempts to influence through suggestion:

The war is actually begun. The next gale that sweeps from the North will bring to our ears the clash of resounding arms. Our brethren are already in the field. Why stand ye here idle?

—PATRICK HENRY.

With a zeal approaching the zeal which inspired the Crusaders who followed Peter the Hermit, our silver Democrats went forth from victory unto victory until they are now assembled, not to discuss, not to debate, but to enter up the judgment already rendered by the plain people of this country. In this contest brother has been arrayed against brother, father against son. The warmest ties of love, acquaintance, and association have been disregarded; old leaders have been cast aside when they refused to give expression to the sentiments of those whom they would lead, and new leaders have sprung up to give direction to this cause of truth. Thus has the contest been waged, and we have assembled here under as binding and solemn instructions as were ever imposed upon representatives of the people.

—WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN.

Figurative and indirect language has suggestive force, because it does not make statements that can be directly disputed. It arouses no contradictory ideas in the minds of the audience, thereby fulfilling one of the basic requisites of suggestion. By *implying* a conclusion in indirect or figurative language it is often asserted most forcefully.

Note that in the following Mr. Bryan did not say that Mr. McKinley would be defeated. He implied it in a much more effective manner:

Mr. McKinley was nominated at St. Louis upon a platform which declared for the maintenance of the gold standard until it can be changed into bimetallism by international agreement. Mr. McKinley was the most popular man among the Republicans, and three months ago everybody in the

Republican party prophesied his election. How is it today? Why, the man who was once pleased to think that he looked like Napoleon—that man shudders today when he remembers that he was nominated on the anniversary of the battle of Waterloo. Not only that, but as he listens he can hear with ever-increasing distinctness the sound of the waves as they beat upon the lonely shores of St. Helena.

Had Thomas Carlyle said: “A false man cannot found a religion,” his words would have been neither so suggestive nor so powerful, nor so long remembered as his implication in these striking words:

A false man found a religion? Why, a false man cannot build a brick house! If he does not know and follow truly the properties of mortar, burnt clay, and what else he works in, it is no house that he makes, but a rubbish heap. It will not stand for twelve centuries, to lodge a hundred and eighty millions; it will fall straightway. A man must conform himself to Nature’s laws, be verily in communion with Nature and the truth of things, or Nature will answer him, No, not at all!

Observe how the picture that Webster draws here is much more emphatic and forceful than any mere assertion could be:

Sir, I know not how others may feel, but as for myself when I see my *alma mater* surrounded, like Caesar in the senate house, by those who are reiterating stab after stab, I would not for this right hand have her turn to me and say, “And thou too, my son!”—WEBSTER.

A speech should be built on sound logical foundations, and no man should dare to speak in behalf of a fallacy. Arguing a subject, however, will necessarily arouse contradictory ideas in the mind of your audience. When immediate action or persuasion is desired, suggestion is more efficacious than argument—when both are judiciously mixed, the effect is irresistible.

QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

1. Make an outline, or brief, of the contents of this chapter.
2. Revise the introduction to any of your written addresses, with the teachings of this chapter in mind.
3. Give two original examples of the power of suggestion as you have observed it in each of these fields: (a) advertising; (b) politics; (c) public

sentiment.

4. Give original examples of suggestive speech, illustrating two of the principles set forth in this chapter.

5. What reasons can you give that disprove the general contention of this chapter?

6. What reasons not already given seem to you to support it?

7. What effect do his own suggestions have on the speaker himself?

8. Can suggestion arise from the audience? If so, show how.

9. Select two instances of suggestion in the speeches found in the Appendix.

10. Change any two passages in the same, or other, speeches so as to use suggestion more effectively.

11. Deliver those passages in the revised form.

12. Choosing your own subject, prepare and deliver a short speech largely in the suggestive style.